

Jobs 101: Escondido program acquaints youth with work world

By: AGNES DIGGS - Staff Writer

When the play-offs and partying are done, when school is out for more than just the summer, students who are not going on to college will be expected to get jobs in the real world.

Many have no idea what that entails, but a stint with Escondido Education COMPACT can help get them on the right path.

The acronym stands for Creating Opportunities, Making Partnerships, and Connecting Teens. The group has been working since 1989 to help prepare teens for successful entry into the work force. It achieves its goals through various forms of career mentoring.

"We have gotten into the key niche of work-readiness training," said Patty Huerta, who has served for almost two years as the group's executive director.

The program serves students from low-income families, those with special needs or those in foster care. The goal is to help them explore careers and develop job skills through site visits, job shadowing and working with a mentor. Kids identify careers they're interested in and are placed accordingly, Huerta said.

"We hope that it becomes a relationship with a professional in a profession that the student is interested in," she said. "It gives the kids a way to explore what life is like in the real world."

The organization works in partnership with the Escondido Union School Districts, the city of Escondido, the Chamber of Commerce and a broad cross-section of local businesses to give students a chance to explore the work world.

A two-way street

The program is a two-way street for mentors, said Escondido resident Jule Sanderson, 48, owner of Hot Shots, a coffee cart business that operates at the corner of Felicita and Centre City Parkway in Escondido.

"I have an empty nest now," she said. "My kids are all grown. I decided I wanted to give it a try. It's very fulfilling. Definitely a learning experience for mentor and mentee."

Sanderson is Canadian and her mentee, Sofia (not her real name) is Latino. Sanderson said their relationship allowed a level of cultural exchange she might not otherwise have access to, and it's been "very eye-opening."

"It's mostly a better understanding of each other," Sanderson said. "Talking about different things like different traditions, different family matters."

Sanderson said her role is to help her mentee develop good strategies and tools that a young person needs to help be productive and improve self-esteem. It's different from parenting, said the mother of two adult daughters. There is no lecturing or passing judgment. The most important thing is to give guidance, and, it is hoped, to get them on the right track.

"I look at it this way," she said. "Life's like a bowling alley, and the mentors are the bumper pads."

The mentees are the ball. They can either go straight or get a little off the path. The mentor is there to keep them out of the gutter."

Among the activities she shared with Sofia was attendance at anger-management classes offered through the mentoring program. The classes teach the young people acceptable ways to handle negative situations or confrontations. Sanderson said Sofia was signed up to go, so she offered to accompany her, and Sofia accepted.

"It was enlightening to me to hear how to handle some of the different situations," she said.

Sanderson's other role is to show her mentee what the work world looks like from an employer's point of view by sharing her business experience, telling the student about past decisions, pointing out things like the financial implications of having graffiti tagged on her place. Her experience offers Sofia a glimpse of how a small business functions.

Special shadows

Last year, the job-shadow component of the program placed 328 students in businesses ranging from an assisted living center and a day spa to the wild animal park and the public library. Through the programs, young people can learn, from personal observation, the basic realities of a career, including required education and training, salary expectations, and working conditions.

The workplace experience not only enhances the opportunity for greater success in school but helps young people understand that they can choose from many vocational career tracks, Patty Huerta said.

As a teen, Joseph Parrish, now 21, was placed in a summer internship with Qwiksign, a San Marcos designer and manufacturer of signs. His site supervisor became his mentor. Eventually, Parrish was hired full time, and worked his way up to shop manager.

COMPACT helped him greatly, he said. He found out through his first internship that archeology wasn't the job for him, and through his second internship, he found a career. At Qwiksign he learned how to work with his hands and was taught a good work ethic, he said. Now he serves the program through Qwiksign's job-shadow program.

"I try to be the same kind of person that people were for me," he said. "And to teach others what I learned here ---- a great work ethic, maturity, to bring your head to work, to take pride in what you do."

He tries to impart to the students who come his way that those skills carry over into whatever they're planning to do in life, he said.

If not for COMPACT, he said, the kids wouldn't have any work exposure at all. And on the day they graduate, he said, they'd have "a nasty wake-up call."

Parrish said it seems that students who are not destined for a four-year college are just written off.

"We think it's extremely important that these kids have a chance to come to a real workplace environment that's not their dad or mom's workplace ---- with real people and real situations and real timelines," he said. "There's no turning your homework in late here."

More than mentoring

In addition to the one-to-one mentoring and the job shadow opportunities, the program provides intensive workshops to give the young people "soft skills" that teach them values and ethics like

being on time for work, being a good employee, how to communicate appropriately in the workplace and other tools they need to ready them for success. Students also prepare a portfolio ---- a rudimentary resume ----- of their experience and accomplishments in high school that they can use to compete for jobs or college.

At the end of the year, they can attend the youth opportunity day organized by the program staff. Those who have completed the training and readied their portfolios have a chance to be interviewed by recruiters looking to fill summer jobs and internships.

Project Hero is a more intensive, more long-term approach to the same task. Students are matched with a mentor in the more traditional way, with the additional layer of adult support for the young person's effort to prepare for a career.

"We ask the mentors to commit to a six -month relationship," Huerta said. "Then the relationship is evaluated to decide what happens from then on. Some of the relationships continue on for years."

The adult friend becomes a confidante, Huerta said ---- somebody the young person can count on for years to come. As important as the exposure to the work world is for the students, the relationships with mentors have an even bigger impact.

Mentors share their experience with their mentees ---- if they had a hard time in high school, they share that, Huerta said. "If they were a good student, they share that."

The relationship helps students to look at their own lives and career options.

One of the biggest pieces of the program is helping the kids learn to solve problems that relate to where they want to go in their lives and how to get there, Huerta said. The older person becomes an advocate for the mentee, referring them to other kinds of help when necessary.

Jule Sanderson philosophically expressed the program's greatest current need.

"My biggest wish is that more people, especially males, if they have an hour or two a week, try to make a difference in a young person's life who just needs someone to talk to," she said.

"That little bit of time you can invest can really make a big difference. All they need is someone to help them out a little bit so they don't think the world is such a harsh place to be in. In the end, only kindness matters."

For information about the Escondido Education COMPACT, call (760) 839-4515 or visit the Web site at www.educationcompact.org.

Interested volunteers can choose from many programs offered by the Escondido Education COMPACT, including these:

Careers Club ---- A competitive yearlong, federally funded work-readiness program that includes supportive services like counseling, clothing and transportation.

Community Service Program ---- Teens exploring potential careers through volunteer service.

Helping Hands Teen Volunteer Club ---- A "teen-run" volunteer service and social club requiring a minimum commitment of 10 hours of community service.

Speakers Bureau ---- Professional, business and community leaders who can provide a "real world" perspective on careers and relevant topics.

Community Collaborative Corps ---- The local AmeriCorps program. Members tutor children, clean up the environment and offer other neighborhood support services.

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